

4 The Naga tiger-man and the modern assemblage of a myth

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In reality I'll be a man. I'll just take a nap [...] and then I go. In reality I'll still be a person. Only by dreaming I'll go [to the tiger world]. In the month of June and July it is the time when our souls roam around most, this is the period when I dream heavily. Not only me. All the souls become other animals in this season.¹

Introduction

The Naga tiger-man or *tekhumia*² who uttered these words describes a phenomenon that in one form or another has revealed itself in the sculpted, painted, oral and printed histories of the world: humans and nonhuman animals take on, share or exchange attributes, as in the broad concept of theriomorphism.³ Yet therianthropy (Greek *therion* 'wild animal' and *anthropos* 'human being', also often referred to as 'lycanthropy', with *lycos* being 'wolf' but also more generally any wild animal) has remained a subject of mythical, popular fascination; a subject hot at the Hollywood box-office, but rarely investigated in the sciences. With the re-emergence of the nature/culture debate, heightened by concerns over the effects of population growth and global warming on human and nonhuman animal habitats (e.g. Cassidy and Mills 2012; Descola 1994; 1996; 2013; van Dooren 2011; 2014; Kohn 2007; 2013; Latour 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2004), a look at more complex forms of human and nonhuman interaction is helpful in elucidating hidden truths about the inextricable life-links that bind humans, nonhuman animals, and the natural world. This chapter is an initial exploration into this phenomenon in the context of the Naga-inhabited areas in the Indo-Burmese borderlands where it is known to have existed among a few particular groups, but is virtually unknown among younger generations as a traditional practice. The reasons for its 'disappearance' are questions that require more in-depth research, though a few general working hypotheses will be presented here. These include pressures associated with population growth and the depletion of forest habitats, and the notion that puritanical forms of Christianity introduced by American Baptist missionaries have eroded traditions that accommodated therianthropy. The latter have perhaps contributed to rupturing what appears to have been a

pre-Christian Naga nature/culture continuum. The emergence of a pan-Naga mythology is a more recent development, and linked to Naga nationalist assertions of difference vis-à-vis the dominant Hindu political discourse of the Indian state. Here the *tekhumiavi*, as a mythic figure with both tragic and heroic qualities, is re-emerging as a symbol that embodies the nature/culture continuum, thus representing the unity of the Naga and their vast ancestral land that underpins Naga nationalist narratives and political assertions.

For those living in the bustling urban areas of Kohima and Dimapur, the *tekhumiavi* is an urban myth, and represents the 'wildness' of the distant rural village. A young undergraduate at Baptist College in Kohima raises his arm and points somewhere to the north or the east – 'over there, the old traditions are still practised'. It is indeed in the 'north' that I first came to know about the 'tiger-man'. Chatting with a group of Ao Naga youths in Mokokchung in 2002, I noted in my notebook a series of descriptions that seemed strange at first, as they usually included the seemingly contradictory phrases 'a village nuisance' and 'a great and powerful mystery' in the same sentence. Ten years later in Kohima, most of my older informants seem uncomfortable with the subject, and often just state something along the lines 'those are old practices, but now we are Christians'. Though rumours about 'this' or 'that' person exhibiting peculiar '*tekhumiavi*-like' behaviour circulate regularly around Kohima Village (adjacent to Kohima Town), I infer that these are things one does not discuss outside of one's family or close age-group friends. However, while on a hike to the Dzülakie forest, my companion – a road contractor – shared a personal experience he attributed to the mysterious activities of a *tekhumiavi*:

Even though we have big dogs in our compound, he reached the pens where we have rabbits and took them. I know it was a *tekhumiavi* because I have felt his presence before. You know, they have both the spirit of a man and the spirit of a tiger; and he moves like a shadow without making any noise. I felt he was following me. I don't have a problem with them, in fact I know an old Chakhesang *tekhumiavi* who lives in Kohima [...] though he was very old the last time I saw him.⁴

Despite his conviction that these were the activities of a local *tekhumiavi*, I was sceptical. This is not because I questioned the phenomenon itself, but because it seemed implausible that a *tekhumiavi* in the form of a leopard or tiger would roam into an urban area and risk being sighted, caught or worse. But the peculiar phenomenon itself felt oddly familiar.

As a youth in Nicaragua I encountered a belief in something akin to the *tekhumiavi* known as *nahaulism*. War loomed in the distance much as it does in the Naga areas, but nothing troubled young Nica imaginations more than a nocturnal visit of the *carretanahua* – a giant 'ghost-cart' driven by an evil spirit or witch, and pulled by a train of skeleton oxen. The elders' accounts often included giant black dogs that would predate on villagers foolish enough to open their doors for a glimpse (see Aragón 2006; Correa 1955; de

Guerrero 1891; Garrison Brinton 1894; Martinez Gonzales 2004; Saler 1964). As with the other neighbourhood kids in Nicaragua, I was immersed in the soup of local legends and folklore, and all this somehow elicited a combination of heightened awareness and all-consuming fear. This played well into the hands of local Christian groups keen on recruiting members. The torturous scenes of hell-fire brimstone portrayed in films projected on outdoor, makeshift screens by travelling evangelists offered a simple formula that appealed to a community burdened by war and superstition. The fear of the *nahual* – or whatever was ‘out there’ that sufficiently provoked a reverence for old beliefs – was invariably linked to more ultimate questions, distracting or tempering the village consciousness as casualties mounted due to the more ‘temporary’ political questions being played out in the mountains a few hours’ drive away.

A visit to Mexico’s more accessible archaeological sites reveals myriad therianthropic images – in particular that of the jaguar-warrior (see also Benson 1998; Miller and Taube 1993; Tate 1999). As mentioned earlier, traces of *nahualism* are found in contemporary mythology (Martinez Gonzales 2004; see also Fuentes and Guzman 1882), and have been studied extensively by anthropologists in Central Mexico, Chiapas and the Yucatan since the mid-1800s (see Garrison Brinton 1894; Kaplan 1956; Nutini and Roberts 1993; Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977). Hutton, the first to describe the Naga *tekhumiavi* at length (especially 1920 and 1921b: 200–208), suggests Naga concepts and beliefs about the *tekhumiavi* are unique in the region, but also notes they closely resemble Meso-American *nahualism*. As with *nahualism* in the Americas, re-imaginings, embellishments and circulation of the myth of the *tekhumiavi* in urban legends and folktales sustain its popular fascination.

The Naga *tekhumiavi* elicits similar reactions to the Meso-American *nahual* from younger generations in Kohima, though very few know it was once a more widespread practice and belief, and that it may be still traced in some areas of Nagaland.⁵ Preliminary research on the subject of tiger transformation may be found throughout Southeast Asia, with some of the most detailed ethnographic work on the subject focused in Malaysia and Indonesia (see Bakels 1994; Boomgaard 1994; Endicott 1979; Wessing 1986).⁶ In Northeast India the phenomenon has been recorded among a variety of large indigenous groups and sub-groups including the Khasis, Garos, Chins and the Nagas. Though there is really no standard definition or way of counting the various communities belonging under the Naga designation,⁷ the focus here is on a few larger groups that have historically been associated with the practice among the Naga, namely the Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Lotha, Sangtam, Sumi and Yimchungrü communities.

Instructive in this inquiry is that the widespread belief in therianthropy found among these groups and in the wider Southeast Asian region is accompanied by an ubiquity of creation myths giving reverence to, and reflecting both a fascination and an affinity with, powerful feline predators such as leopards and tigers (see Abbot and Thant Han 2000; Elwin 1958; 1970; Norbu 1999). An ancient Ao Naga myth reflects this:

in the beginning of the earth there was no distinction between light and darkness [and] men and animals lived together in perfect understanding and harmony [...] [thus the spread of] tales of girls being ‘married’ to tigers and lovely maidens having trees as lovers.

(Ao 1999: 65–66)

Similar myths of origin are found among Native Americans, in Amazonia (see for example Kohn 2007 and Viveiros de Castro 1998) and among the Inuit of Alaska, whose traditions ‘describe an early period when all animals and humans lived in the same community, speaking the same language, frequently changing appearance, and intermarrying’ (Willis 2006: 31). Students of mythology would perhaps find these passages unremarkable, and indeed in nearly every way they adhere to universal ideas and symbols found in creation myths throughout the world (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1964–1971). Yet the metaphorical quality typically associated with such origin myths is unsettled by accounts documented by ethnographers that are more consistent with the literal approach found in local understandings. Illustrative of this are ethnographies detailing the meticulous regulation of various food-related taboos, hunting practices, and other rituals invested in the notion of a common kinship between humans, nonhuman animals (specifically tigers or leopards) and spirits. Hutton (1921a: 208), for instance, writes:

When an Angami village kills a tiger or a leopard the Kemovo (priest or elder) proclaims a non-working day for the death of an ‘elder brother’. The flesh of tigers and leopards is often eaten by Angamis (men only and under certain restrictions), that of leopards (never of tiger) by the Changs, but the Sema would not dream of eating either. It is absolutely *genna* (taboo) to touch it, and most Sema villages, if they kill a tiger or a leopard, leave the body to rot where it lies, though the head may be taken and brought back to the village. The fear of the tiger among all Nagas is considerable, and all regard them as beings apart from the ordinary wild animals and very nearly connected with the human race. Thus a man who is descended from one who was killed by a tiger will not eat meat from a tiger’s kill, as it would be equivalent to sharing the dish of an hereditary enemy.

Ao (1999; see also Changkija 2007) suggests that this belief in the common kinship between humans and nonhuman animals extends to the notion of soul co-essence, and that this is a significant idea governing Naga ontology, namely ‘the human soul can reside in forms other than the human’ (1999: 66). Jacobs, citing W. G. Archer, records the words of a Sangtam Naga *tekhumiavi* describing the process as a shifting of the soul between the human body and that of the animal:

My soul does not live in my body. It lives in the leopard. It is not in me now. It visits me in sleep. I meet it in dreams. Then I know what it [sic]

has been doing ... If anything happened to my leopard in the day, my soul would come and tell me. I would get the same wounds.

(Jacobs 1998: 85–86)

As with the testimony I included at the introduction, the Sangtam *tekhumiavi*, at the time of transformation is engaged in a kind of soul-transfer with a leopard, where the man's body remains untransformed, and the man's spirit or soul is channelled in a sort of deep dream state and becomes fully engaged in the actions of the nonhuman animal. The body of the man (who may be lying in bed at home) moves convulsively and shifts around as the tiger or leopard moves about in the forests or fields outside. Entering the tiger or leopard during sleep, the soul usually returns to the human body with daylight. But if, for example, it were to remain in the nonhuman animal for a period of days, the human body, though conscious, would be weak and lethargic. Hutton relates; 'During sleep the soul is the leopard with its full faculties, but when the human body is awake the soul is only semiconsciously, if at all, aware of its doings as a leopard, unless under the influence of some violent emotion, such as fear, experienced by the leopard' (1921b: 202). According to Hutton, *tekhumiavi* possessions are often accompanied by swelling and severe pain in the knee and elbow joints, as well as pain in the small of the back, depending on the level of activity of the tiger or leopard (1921b: 202).

Regarding the acquisition of the unique ability, most accounts suggest it happens at an early age. Detailing the Sumi Naga beliefs on the subject, Hutton's informants suggested that the phenomenon could not be induced by external means but that it could be acquired through close association with a known *tekhumiavi*. The ability could also be obtained by being fed 'chicken flesh and ginger ... given in successive collections of six, five and three pieces of each together on crossed pieces of plantain leaf' by a *tekhumiavi* (1921: 201). Among the Ao Nagas, the belief is that the ability is inherited from either the paternal or maternal lines, though a generation gap may occur in the line of succession. In addition, multiple family members with a tiger-spirit are not known to exist or to have existed. Inherited or non-inherited, predestination is necessary and those possessing a tiger-spirit can discern if others are also predestined to receive the 'gift' (Sutter 2008: 280). Still others suggest that the tiger-spirit can also be acquired by appealing to a person who is 'reputed to be in possession of such a power'. Ao writes that 'if the applicant's prayer is to be granted, he will be offered a cup of wine or pipe to smoke by the person to whom he has appealed' (1999: 67).

In an interview I conducted in 2010, my informant – a former soldier in the Naga underground in the 1960s and 1970s who claimed to have personally known many *tekhumiavi* – was eager to explain the process in which a person acquires the tiger-spirit:

In the beginning, the [tiger-spirit] takes the shape of small insects, it then takes the form of a butterfly and the like, progressing into [...] the shape

of animals like squirrels, and rats. Later on it is growing, getting bigger and [...] it will change into animals like dogs, in physical appearance. When that happens, it will start attacking livestock. And it will eventually turn into a tiger. When it turns into an actual tiger, the person's tiger-spirit will roam around people's houses, properties and will start attacking chickens. The person's tiger-spirit not only attacks and eats the chickens, but it will start scaring people or show his tiger-spirit to others.

Descriptions of the world that the *tekhumiavi* navigates in tiger form are rare. Though there is a considerable gap in anthropological research in the Naga-inhabited areas from the 1940s through the 1990s due to the Indo-Naga War, recent fieldwork on the subject (most notably Ao 1999; Longchar and Vashum 1998; Longchar and Davis 1999; Longchar 2000; Sutter 2008) also demonstrates striking similarities between current and early descriptions of the tiger-spirit world (particularly Hutton 1920; 1921a; 1921b; 1931; 1942; Mills 1922; Smith 1925), namely that it is socially organised in ways that resemble human social structure. Nonhuman animals in this domain are social beings – with societies, political structures, and specifically designated duties, the distribution of which is based on a stratified system of ranks. Informants who have participated in this world in their transformed tiger forms describe the existence of tiger conferences, tiger battalions, and companies with rules and laws – all dictated and enforced by a ‘council of tigers’:

On 5th August we used to have a conference, after the harvest ... every year. [...] Piyong Tenem is near the Dikhu riverbank. There is one waterfall, a very big one. This is the place. [...] There are also seasons ... We use to decide in full moon nights. During full moon we hold our meetings. [...] And then what kind of animals we can take – all these things are discussed. We have to divide the animals among ourselves. [...] And then, there is also a discussion about the fields of the farmers. We have a system. We will discuss about the farmers. Whether the next harvest will be good or bad – we will decide. If the farmers face water problems we will call the water. [...] But if they are in bad luck, they use to face problems from us. Means: It depends upon the mood of the Water God.

(Sutter 2008: 272)

The laws set forth by this underworld encompass a wide range of activities for the tiger-men, including a prescribed diet. The spirit-guardians indicate which animals can be hunted, and as different spirits have ‘ownership’ of different areas of the forest, mountain and rivers, they must be consulted before a kill (Sutter 2008: 272–273). Besides the arduous tasks demanded by the ‘council of tigers’, and the demands of the spirits, interviewees also described a lighter side. Sutter writes:

[It is] a complete tiger world in which they, as tigers, make jokes, fight, marry and sometimes even have families. The Ao tiger-man from Khensa even sang a song in a fictive language, which male and female tigers sing out loud in call and response form: 'Every time we meet, the male tigers used to hold their *daos* and then they sing: *Ejemtachuyula, ejemtachuyula* and the females will respond to them: *Ankangkangrakshawai, ankangkangrakshawai*'.

(2008: 285)

Tekhumiavi would often spend days at a time in their darkened homes, asleep and engaged in soul-travel, living and interacting with other spirits through the bodies of animals which may be hundreds of kilometres away.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's 'perspectivism' thesis (1998) draws from similar findings among Amazonian indigenous peoples. In these perspectival ontologies, animals and spirits are anthropomorphic, and though masked by bodily 'skins', like humans, they are socially organised and can possess agency. Along similar lines, Bird-David (1999) in her efforts to recast the term 'animism', develops the idea of 'relational epistemologies' wherein human beings co-inhabit the world alongside other people, some of whom may not be human. This of course recalls our earlier discussion regarding human and nonhuman animal kinship in the creation myths of the different Naga groups. Notions of personhood, therefore, are developed by human and nonhuman beings through shared, embodied interactions and necessarily maintained in relation to each other.

We might view this nature/culture continuum as necessitating a transfer of knowledge between the two, and this is usually done by mediums; individuals endowed with abilities that enable them to see the continuum and provide necessary insight to those who have greater difficulty with such perception. Oral tradition, of course, is just as important in this transfer of knowledge as the practices of skilled or gifted individuals (healers, shamans, mediums, etc.), and folk-tales and myths shared among community learners deliver a tried-and-tested classification system for carefully discerning the multitude of visible and invisible signs and actants one encounters; a map of this vast hidden domain and a prescribed set of behaviours and rituals one must adhere to in order to traverse the terrain without provoking disequilibrium and ultimately misfortune on a community.

Easterine Kire (alias Iralu), a distinguished Naga poet and writer, has established a pan-Naga literary canon by exploring these concepts as they are common among the various Naga traditions (Iralu 2001). Here the attempt is to employ a familiar framework that translates beyond the Angami Naga pre-Christian traditions of her own ancestry. Moving up in this space, however, is incrementally more difficult, as the various Naga traditions would populate this general framework differently given the distinct names, characteristics and behaviours of their deities, spirits, hierarchies and domains. Though her own poetic license to massage these differences is operative (and somewhat

expected), there are additional repositories from which she draws material that resonates with her readers, namely Christian theology, and to a lesser extent politics.

It must be stated at this juncture that the *tekhumavi* phenomenon is not practised among the Angami Nagas, nor has it been recorded among them. Hutton's monograph (1921a: 243) states this quite plainly: 'Lycanthropy is believed in but not practiced by the Angamis, though their neighbours and perhaps near relatives the Semas are inveterate lycanthropists.' This is important because Kire's writing on the Naga *tekhumavi* (or as she prefers 'tiger-man' or 'weretigerman') is situated within a recognisable Angami context and cosmology, thus constituting an amalgamation of distinct Naga traditions (Iralu 2001).⁸ Before proceeding to her text, however, a general overview of the Angami belief system will be helpful.

Kepenuopfü, literally 'birth spirit', is believed to be both the creator of all living beings, as well as ancestors of humans. As the aforementioned origin myth places 'Man', Tiger (and all larger cats) and Spirit with a common ancestor (though Hutton is not explicit), *Kepenuopfü* may be placed as one-and-the-same with the deceased mother now ascended in spirit form.⁹ All other animals were brought by the *terhuomia*, who are believed to be lower deities, chief among them being *Rutzeh*, who is evil and for whom such things as sudden death are blamed. There is also the mischievous *Telepfü* who is held responsible when men, women and children go missing. It is believed that *Telepfü* steals her captives of their senses so they are unable to scream or run, but she does not kill them. Benevolent *terhuomia* include *Maweno* who is known to visit farmers, and blesses people with good crops or livestock; *Ayepi*, a sort of fairy who lives with humans in their homes and brings prosperity; *Tsükho* and *Dzürawü*, male and female spirits represented as dwarfs, are believed to live in the forests and are guardians of the wild animals; and *Metsimo*, who, as Hutton writes, 'guards the approach to paradise, a sort of Angami St. Peter', possessing attributes (according to the Memi Tenyimia tradition) that could qualify him as *Kepenuopfü*'s husband (1921a: 182 and footnote). There is also a belief in *Rhopfö*, a female spirit that is attached to or accompanies every human being. According to Hutton, *Rhopfö* is:

a mysterious spiritual force which seems to combine the attributes of guardian angel, familiar spirit, Destiny, and in some cases it would seem even of a man's own soul. The description is vague enough, but the danger to be avoided in transcribing any Angami ideas upon the supernatural is, above all, the danger of distinguishing what is vague, of giving form to what is void, of defining what is not finite.

(1921a: 183)

Tekhu-rho, the god and guardian of tigers and leopards, is considered a very powerful deity, and believed to be responsible for the disappearance of humans (primarily of hunters) in the jungle. At the moment of a disappearance,

village elders will declare a *genna* or ‘prohibition’ (in this case entailing a community-wide freeze on field labour) in an effort to appease the angry deity. Search parties will then enter the forest to begin a search. There is a tradition among many Naga groups involving the propping open of the jaw of a killed tiger with a bamboo or wooden stick and placing its head into a running stream far from the village. The belief is that, if prepared quickly enough, when *Tekhu-rho* asks the dead tiger for the name of the responsible hunter – seeking to avenge the killing – he will only hear the meaningless gargle of water (Hutton 1921a: 182). *Terhuomia* are potentially countless, every village having a variety of *terhuomia* that a neighbouring village may not have heard of. The hundreds of myths, legends, folktales and songs that are still shared around kitchen hearths are firmly contextualised within this hidden world where *terhuomia* inhabit stones, trees, forests, rivers and mountains. According to one of my informants, ‘the spirits demand respect and enact harsh punishments on those who are careless and don’t follow the ancestral laws’.¹⁰

Angami beliefs about the *tekhumavi* straddle two worlds – the world of human, waking reality, and a very different, seemingly mythological one – a vast universe of spirits, signs and omens (see Changkija 2007 for a similar description and beliefs among the Ao). This invisible world functions as a repository of knowledge, housing historical, religious, and moral teachings accessible through dreams or in the telling of folktales, in the singing of songs, in the enactment of rituals, and in some cases through divination (see Iralu 2001).¹¹ In her book *Naga Folktales Retold* (Iralu 2009: 75) Kire situates the *tekhumavi* in relation to family and village life, and in relation to larger historical imperatives:

He was half-man, half-spirit, the last in a long line of weretigermen. Tsaricho’s father and his father before him had carried the spirit of the tiger in their beings. Many in his family thought he would bequeath this strange legacy to his young son who was unformed but not much younger than Tsaricho himself when he became a tiger-man. But he would have none of it. The lad attended the Mission School and sang the songs of the Lamb. It was not long before Tsaricho could tell that the boy did not have it in him to carry the spirit of the tiger. To his credit he refrained from imposing his will on his only son. He checked the elders with the words: ‘Let it be, his is a destiny different from ours.’ Was he seven or eight when his father had called him to his side of the fire and shared portions of chicken liver and fragments of country ginger with him? He could not remember now but he could certainly remember a time when he had not carried the spirit of the tiger.

In this passage, Kire is careful to describe Angami beliefs about tiger-spirit transmission in which a person either inherits or gains the tiger-spirit through the sharing of pieces of fresh ginger root and chicken liver with a known *tekhumavi*. The reader also gets a sense of the level of *terhuomia* activity present in the

forest. In the tale, two men from a neighbouring village have just threatened to shoot Tsaricho's great grandfather's tiger if they see it near their village, and are now returning home (Iralu 2001: 76):

The men turned to go but not before glimpsing the unspoken anger on the old man's face. It was this memory of his great grandfather that returned to Tsaricho – the sight of his countenance darkening like a rapidly gathering storm sky. The two men never reached their village. They were on the thin path that intersected the woods when they heard the rumble of thunder. They turned this way and that but all around them trees crashed down uprooted and upclawed. The first man opened his mouth to shout but words failed to come: in the next moment his blood froze within him as he saw the giant figure of a tiger leap out of the darkness. Before the tiger descended upon him, his last thought was that he had never seen a more magnificent animal before, the symmetry of blood and sinew wonderfully displayed in the mid-air leap.

Kire describes a convergence of invisible agents involved in orchestrating the attack, capturing the men who would defy the *tekhumiavi* (who at this point is almost equated with a demigod, as he is both spirit and tiger, and commands the invisible powers of the forest who participate in the killing). Tsaricho's great grandfather bridges the continuum between visible and the invisible and occupies a powerful, yet sacrificial element in the story, reconciling the brokenness that prevails in the mythological roster between Man and Tiger, but ultimately suffering classic 'heroic' consequences, as he is feared and thus marginalised from the community. Undoubtedly, the text integrates more recent ideas with old beliefs and thus creates a genre that ties into the mythological with a reinterpretation that will appeal to modern readers. One significant element in the story is the liminal state of the *tekhumiavi* vis-à-vis the community. By all accounts, this is a recent development that has precipitated the disappearance of the *tekhumiavi* from the community. This marginality in relation to the community is picked up by Sutter's informant as extending to issues of practicality (2008: 271):

My tiger used to come up to the Milak river. He very much wants to come to my place, but my *chubok*, the space below my kitchen, is too small ... there is not enough space here for him to sleep [...] He is seven feet long, my tiger [...] That's why. Nowadays he never comes, he never crosses the Milak river. [...] Only sometimes, very rarely, he even comes to my place. But it is very difficult since the villagers are afraid of tigers. I don't want to disturb the villagers. That's why I don't allow him to come here.

Kire's story (Iralu 2001) also introduces, in a subtle way, the influence of early Christian missions on the village community – particularly the introduction of an English-medium mission school for primary education. This more or less

situates the story at the junction of two belief systems, and as alluded to earlier, the text reveals elements of Christian theology – particularly soteriology – and hints at some compatibility between them.¹² Nevertheless, a once revered village *tekhumavi* is being displaced, and though he must make a choice regarding the continuation or cessation of a predestined and in some sense, a sacrificial legacy, his fate has been decided. The author reveals this at the very outset of the story, and this may very well be suggestive of lamentation.

As discussed throughout, the most significant research on the subject of Naga therianthropy was conducted nearly a century ago by Hutton (with important publications on the subject in 1920 and 1931), and to a lesser extent Mills (1922; 1926). Their overall research agenda followed a predefined outline conceived in response to a general concern that the colourful Naga traditions were vanishing and needed urgent documenting.¹³ But their work in relation to the *tekhumavi* phenomenon went over and above this requirement. Clearly engrossed by the subject, they collected anecdotes, documented personal experiences and aimed to analytically clarify the mechanisms employed in the enactment of tiger-transformation (the idea of the transferability of a soul or spirit between hosts), and investigated at length the parallels they observed between Naga tiger-transformation and *nahualism* in the Americas. It is no stretch to imagine that it was fuelled by an intense personal curiosity. What is lacking, however, is a more detailed recording of the oral histories of the various Naga groups, and how practices such as tiger-transformation fit within them. In this regard, the project was left unfinished or open-ended, and it will be up to a new wave of anthropologists and scholars concerned with recording the oral histories of the Nagas – led to some degree by Ao (1999), Longchar (2000), and more recently Sutter (2008) and Kaiser (in Oppitz et al. 2008) – to pick up those threads and take the research further. This brief summary of Naga tiger-transformations including some recent interviews with Naga informants will hopefully contribute to the cause.

Conclusion

Research into this unique and complex phenomenon is considerably more difficult now than when the scholars whose work I have summarised above were active. For one, deforestation, over-hunting and poaching have increased at alarming rates in the past few decades, and many believe the extinction of large feline predators such as tigers is only a matter of time. Research restrictions have also been in effect since the advent of the Indo-Naga war in the 1950s, and it is only since 2011 that visitors have been allowed to stay longer than the ten days prescribed by the once strictly enforced Restricted Area designation. A further concern is the extent to which Christian institutions have managed to subdue traditional religious practices that offer glimpses into vast hidden spaces that remain largely unexplored. Finally, inter-generational transmission of oral history has been severely quieted, and though it is difficult to identify any one cause, the reshuffling of community space, state-led

education reforms and the general perception among older generations that young people are disinterested in their traditions all seem to contribute to the problem. However, these are areas that require further investigation.

One approach is to follow the local narrative as closely as possible. For instance, one early Saturday morning in August, I made my way down through Kohima Village to a house on the eastern slope for a cup of tea with a family I had met some months back before the monsoon. They asked what I was working on currently, and I mentioned the research on the *tekhumiavi*. My hosts were quite surprised to hear this. 'You know of this?' I explained that I was writing a general overview of what had been recorded on the subject by earlier researchers, with hopes of opening a new project on contemporary perceptions. The woman spoke first. 'There is a *tekhumiavi* near our fields. We saw his tracks a few months back. These are very large, and the rains didn't even wash them away – they have five-fingered claws.' Her husband then spoke, stating '*tekhumiavi* tracks have five-fingered imprints – not four.'¹⁴ I asked where their fields were, and she pointed in the direction of the Border Security Force encampment on the road to Phek. Not terribly far from the BSF camp lives a good friend of mine, the road contractor cited above, whose account I had initially questioned, but which I now have to accept I may have written off too soon!

Notes

- 1 Quote by NizhatoZhimomi of Khukyie village, Nagaland; interviewed by Sutter (2008: 286).
- 2 The term *tekhumiavi* (literally 'tiger grown into the shape of') is an Angami Naga term used as a general description of the phenomenon and typically understood to be inclusive of the experiences of women as well as men with this particular ability. *Theku* or 'tiger' refers certainly to the Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*) but is also the term used for the much more common leopard (*Panthera pardus delacouri*), and smaller cats such as the golden cat (*Felis aurata*) in the Naga region. That said, *tekhumiavi* would also be used to describe rare occurrences involving other animal hosts such as monkeys, dogs, and snakes.
- 3 The Hindu concept of *avatar* is worth mentioning here as it shares some characteristics with the idea of soul-transfer or what is often referred to as shape-shifting. In this belief a deity descends (in Sanskrit *ava* is 'descend', and *tar* is 'to cross') and manifests itself (i.e. 'incarnates') in human bodily form. Though there is little relationship between Hinduism and the belief system of the Nagas, it is nevertheless indicative of the ubiquity of this idea of soul transference or astral projection.
- 4 Interview with A. Chielie in Dzülakie, January 2010, Nagaland, India.
- 5 These accounts are drawn from a series of interviews conducted among mostly teenagers in Kohima in January and February 2013.
- 6 In November of 2009 I interviewed Dr Gam Shae, a Baptist missionary who was serving in Banjarmasin, the provincial capital of Kalimantan, Indonesia in 1998 when he witnessed a very peculiar event in his own home. A guest student, Henry, 'was on the floor again growling, gnashing his teeth, clawing the floor, resisting anyone who restrained him with superhuman strength. Henry did not know what transpired during this type of experience. But he knew that all of his friends

became afraid of him and rejected him for friendship. As a member of his own cultural group, he shared with his friends the understanding that he was under the influence of a power outside of himself. He believed that he was possessed by the spirit of his ancestor called the tiger spirit. Furthermore he was told by his relatives that whenever he was possessed by that spirit, he would become lucky. So while it was a frightening experience for his friends, he looked upon it as a positive experience that would bring fortune.'

- 7 Some suggest that there exist anywhere from thirty to just under eighty tribes belonging to the larger Naga group (Oppitz et al. 2008: 16).
- 8 The *tekhumiavi* phenomenon itself is an adoption from Angami neighbours – likely the Chakhesang, close neighbours of the Angamis. The Chakhesang Nagas are in fact a recent clustering of three Naga groups – Chakri, Kezha and Sangtam – all members of the larger Tenymia cultural-linguistic group which includes the Angamis. However, the distinction is made as the Angamis likely split off from the former some four or five centuries ago (taking the age of Angami villages as a measure).
- 9 This follows my own deductive reasoning based on Hutton's statement: 'The dwelling place of Kepenopū is always located in the sky, and the souls of those who have lived good lives, according to the Angami standard, that is, go to the sky after death and dwell with her' (1921a: 181). The Sumi Nagas also believe in a Supreme God named *Alhou* or *Timilhou*. The Sumi also believe in spirits of the sky, *Kungumi*, which can be equated with Tenymia concepts of *terhuomia* (see Hutton 1921b: 191).
- 10 My informant, the former soldier of the underground, speaks of river spirits, forest spirits, and mountain spirits with complete candour and seriousness. He spoke at length about the daughter of *Japfū* (the third-highest mountain peak in Nagaland). *Japfū*, angry with his daughter, cursed her by splitting her head down the middle (a mountain near Wokha has a large slit down the middle from which a beautiful waterfall spills out). The wife of a man from Dimapur was reputed to have had a strange relationship with the river spirit which was said to be *Japfū's* daughter. She would spend half of the year with her human husband in Dimapur, and the other half with her female spirit-lover in Wokha (15 January 2010).
- 11 Unfortunately, much of this material has yet to be recorded. Stuart Blackburn, in *Naga Identities*, writes: 'Naga oral traditions have not been adequately researched. We have a reasonable body of folktales available in print, but little in the way of other texts, and even this corpus of tales largely rests on field work done nearly a century ago. Since those days, little work has been carried out on oral traditions amount the Nagas' (Blackburn 2008: 260).
- 12 Discussions I have had with numerous Naga theologians and many other informants over the years confirm a general belief that Naga traditional religion was not dissimilar to the Hebrew traditions of the Old Testament, and thus 'pre-fitted' for the introduction of Christianity.
- 13 In the Naga areas, Hutton's 1921 monograph *The Angami Nagas* was the first volume to be published following what was by then a standardised ethnographic outline developed by the Assam Administration, using as its model the 1907 monograph on the Khasis of Assam written by Major P. R. T. Gurden (Deputy Commissioner of Eastern Bengal and Assam, and Superintendent of Ethnography in Assam). Gurden had been charged with supervising fifteen such monographs that were to cover the larger indigenous groups found in the Patkai mountains (Naga Hills); the plains and surrounding hill areas of Manipur (Lushai and Kuki groups); and the southeastern areas of Assam (Lushais) including present-day Meghalaya (Garos and Khasis). J. H. Hutton would revive the series after stalled activity due to the First World War (Vidyarthi 1979: 54–60).
- 14 Interview with A. R. family, P-Khel, Kohima Village, 10 August 2013.

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